A Conversation with Roy Palmer

Rodrigue Yossa

Roy Palmer has been involved in the seafood industry since 1972. He has travelled extensively and is experienced in post-harvest activities with training qualifications and has regular consulting activities. He works for and with many organizations through his consultancy and writes for numerous magazines and has good knowledge of commercial fishing, fisheries and aquaculture and is in regular demand to present at conferences, recently presenting on the Blue Economy at the International Society of Professional Innovation Management (ISPIM) Conference in Melbourne, Australia. Roy is a believer in continuous improvement and collaboration and is always striving for innovative ways to improve our industry. He has taken a lead role in new ventures such as the Association of International Seafood Professionals and he combines that with the lead role with Aquaculture without Frontiers, which is work done by many volunteers who share their skills, knowledge and time to improve conditions for the poor who are struggling with hunger and malnutrition. He also works to help raise the profile and consumption of seafood including involvement with the Global Initiative of Life and Leadership through Seafood (GILLS) and in getting seafood information out to politicians, media and consumers. Roy Palmer has recently worked with the Government of Mexico by assisting them in increasing seafood consumption and is now working for FAO on developing a strategy for seafood consumption in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He believes that aquaculture will become recognized as the most important farming that the world does.

THE IDEAL AQUACULTURE SCIENTIST WOULD BE SOMEONE WHO IS PASSIONATE ABOUT WHAT HE DOES AND WHO WANTS TO ENGAGE WITH THE INDUSTRY TO FIND NEW WAYS TO PROMOTE PRODUCTIVITY, BEST PRACTICES AND INCREASED PROFITABILITY THROUGH GENETICS OR NUTRITION OR ANY OTHER ASPECTS OF AQUACULTURE SCIENCE.

Rodrigue Yossa: Why have you chosen to work in the seafood industry?

Roy Palmer: When I was about 21 years old, I went out for a dinner with work colleagues and I had smoked trout as the entrée. From this dish, I was infected with *Salmonella typhimurium*, which kept me in the hospital for one month and out of work for about three months. When I was in the hospital, in the next bed was an Australian man who was telling me stories about his travels all over the world, which urged me to do some traveling. A few months later, I managed to travel to Australia on a two-year work arrangement known as the Ten Pound Scheme. The first job that I got in Australia was in a company importing and exporting seafood. It was funny because a few months earlier, I nearly died from eating fish and there I was selling fish. That is how I started learning about seafood. So, since this first experience, I have gradually gotten involved deeper in the seafood industry and then in the aquaculture industry at local, regional and global levels.

Rodrigue Yossa: How would you describe the ideal aquaculture scientist?

Roy Palmer: The ideal aquaculture scientist would be someone who is passionate about what he does and who wants to engage with the industry to find new ways to promote productivity, best practices and increased profitability through genetics or nutrition or any other aspects of aquaculture science. The more the scientist will concentrate on what the issues in the aquaculture industry are, the more likely he will receive support from the industry and the more valuable the aquaculture science will become. Aquaculture scientists who are only driven by academia (scientific publications, books, etc.) are very important in society but the best aquaculture scientists should be close to the aquaculture industry and inclined to solve its problems. At the recent ISPIM Conference a workshop discussed how entrepreneurship can become a powerful force in solving world's challenges and how this was a key for future learning. I believe this is definitely the case with aquaculture – the same old approach will not solve the issues as we move forward.

Rodrigue Yossa: How would you describe the ideal aquaculture producer?

Roy Palmer: The ideal aquaculture producer is someone who understands that aquaculture is a tough game and it is about the long haul. When you look at the game of soccer, wherever you are in the world, the rules of this game are the same. Soccer is a game - aquaculture is a business; so why do we make it harder

for businesses to produce food as against a game? Aquaculture involves a lot of politics (governments and NGOs) dictating how aquaculture should be operated and setting standards and norms that do not necessarily allow the aquaculture industry to grow. In many countries aquaculture is still locked into fisheries and therefore its opportunity is limited. Fisheries are hunter-gatherer activities but aquaculture is about nurturing and growing. So, while the two come together through post-harvest activities, they are totally different. Ideal aquaculture producers from all over the world should take control of their products and work with decision-makers to set global standards that would be adapted to local reality to produce safe, healthy and valuable seafood. Farmers need to be more vocal to change the way aquaculture production and regulations operate because, at the end of the day, they are the ones who are producing seafood to feed the world.

Rodrigue Yossa: What do you think are the main challenges of aquaculture in the world?

Roy Palmer: The first main challenge of aquaculture is disease. Biosecurity is an essential element in the fight against disease and it is not an area where farmers can expect others to do the job for them. Everyone needs to understand that we all play a major role here. We should find ways to prevent diseases, learn and act on diseases, share information about diseases, and create best practices to manage diseases in the aquaculture industry. There is a massive amount of work still to be done in this area.

Next is the high cost of feed. I think every second scientist I meet is an aquaculture nutritionist so clearly there is much effort happening. There has been a lot of successful efforts to improve the quality of feed in the aquaculture industry over the last twenty years. If these successes occurred in another industry, several aquaculture nutritionists would have received awards for their work but for some reason this is not acknowledged.

Another challenge is to find space for aquaculture. In this regard, we need to make the case that aquaculture will be an important opportunity for food production over the next 30-50 years, and this will require space beyond the land. Thus, in addition to the development of inland aquaculture, offshore aquaculture will need to be expanded in the future to meet the ever-increasing global seafood demand.

Rodrigue Yossa: What does the future of aquaculture look like in Australia?

Roy Palmer: For the moment, it is not looking great. We have the skills and knowledge and heaps of educational support along with some good and passionate farmers but we have a major problem with politics in the industry and in government. Some bureaucrats work against aquaculture instead of working for aquaculture and I often wonder why we allow unskilled and ill-informed people to be in positions where they hold key roles in governments yet know next to nothing about the subject. This seems to happen in most of the developed countries, where some minority groups (bureaucrats) dictate the fate of an entire industry. Unfortunately the Australian aquaculture industry has a weak advocacy platform and is not a united industry as it tends to be species versus species as against a collective and consequently has not been as vocal as it should have been.

Australia has the world's third largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for water, has the skills and education and yet produces less than 1 percent of world's aquaculture and relies on about 75 percent imported seafood for its community. Over the last ten years many hundreds of millions of dollars has gone into research but sadly the industry is still not able to guarantee food security to the community. Timor Leste, one of the poorest countries in the world has a national aquaculture plan but regrettably Australia does not. Surely this paragraph explains my frustration with Australia!

Rodrigue Yossa: What does the future of aquaculture look like in the world?

Roy Palmer: It looks absolutely fantastic. If I was younger, I would be looking to learn the basics of aquaculture and be taking an entrepreneurial pathway. I would get an understanding on how to produce food in water without wasting this water (through recirculating aquaculture systems, aquaponics, etc.), maximizing the use of waste through Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA) and I would take the huge opportunities offered by the emerging blue revolution/economy to sustainably feed the world with seafood and plants grown in water.

Rodrigue Yossa: What do you think about professional certification of aquaculturists?

Roy Palmer: I do believe that the time has come for a professional certification approach in our industry. There are a lot of specialists in the aquaculture sector who do not necessarily understand what the issues are in the industry. There are, for instance, some professors who have never worked in the industry so are more focused on theory and funding their research programs which may never solve real industry problems. Certified aquaculture and/or seafood professionals will combine academic experience with industry experience and that will then be a much better fit for this professional concept and for industry outcomes.

Rodrigue Yossa: What would be the steps towards the professionalization of aquaculturists?

Roy Palmer: These steps should be discussed with other actors in the aquaculture sector to make sure that this professionalization focuses the mind on what the issues are in the industry. Also, this has to be a global concept, because the more aquaculture professionals will become global and be recognized all over the world, the better the profession will be.

Rodrigue Yossa: What would you have done differently if you had to restart your career in aquaculture?

Roy Palmer: Don't be afraid of making mistakes because it is only by learning from those mistakes that you can make progress and get continuous improvement. Never fear appointing someone who may be brighter than you as it will spur you to greater heights. Get the best education you can to ensure that you are maximizing your personal development.

Rodrigue Yossa: What advice would you give to young aquaculturists?

Roy Palmer: Get involved, make a commitment, and get the right attitude. You could be the smartest person on earth but if you do not have the right attitude (such as getting to a meeting on time, under-promising and over-delivering, taking an interest), then you will find it difficult to succeed in the seafood world. Never stand on your laurels. Ask questions, even if they appear silly, and please push the envelope!

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